



# The (nearly) Unabridged History Of Outdoor Ministry

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## Part I

The outdoors and especially the wilderness have always played a key part in God's work of human restoration. God himself often uses places of wilderness to train his followers.<sup>1</sup> God's leaders have ascertained this and used the outdoors to disciple others throughout history. The first record we have of the use of the outdoors in organized ministry is the School of the Prophets begun by the Prophet Samuel in ancient Israel (2 Ki. 6). These schools were likely set in rural locations and on the outskirts of town. Outdoor work and leisure were a part of their routine.<sup>1a,2</sup>

Other Biblical examples of spiritual training in the outdoors include John the Baptist, an Essene educated in a remote wilderness (Lk. 1:80)<sup>3</sup>; John's disciples trained by him in the desert wilderness (Mt. 3:1-17); Jesus who was put through the wilderness school by the Holy Spirit (Lk. 4:1-13). Also, whenever we get a peek at Jesus' instruction to his disciples, it is almost always in remote, outdoor places where they were undistracted. Jesus spent much time in remote, natural areas to rejuvenate his spirit.

The benefits of the outdoors were not lost on the Medieval monks. They also had a close relationship with the land and the outdoors as well. This was considered an essential part of spiritual development and maintaining purity of mind. Their monasteries were often self-sufficient requiring the monks to grow all their own food.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

Modern outdoor ministry as it is known today really began in the 19th century. Its history can be categorized into three pivotal eras. The youth ministry era, the reconnection era, and the experiential era. The outdoor ministry movement of the 19th century was defined by youth ministry leaders attempting to reconnect urban youth with nature. It is tied closely with the youth ministry movement. For many decades, they were one-and-the-same.

### THE YOUTH MINISTRY ERA: 1785 - 1861

The Industrial Age in Europe and America caused many people to cram into tight cities where little trees or grass existed. Philanthropists noted concern for the youth who were often involved in criminal activity. Statistics show a drastic increase in juvenile crime from 1800 - 1850 justifying their concerns. As drastic shifts in populations from rural to city settings took place social structures were upset and left many families in poverty. Poverty

hurt the youth most. It was concern for these youth, for the future generations, that drove individuals and churches to take revolutionary action to confront these issues.<sup>7,8</sup>

The youth ministry movement has its roots in the formation of Sunday School. A major figure in the Sunday School tradition was William Fox who founded the Sunday School Society in London in 1785. Originally, Sunday School was an all-day school program for poor working youth who had no other opportunity for education. Teachers taught reading and writing with the Bible as the main textbook.<sup>9</sup>

During this era, the idea of healing and rejuvenation in nature in the modern sense began to find widespread support. It can be traced back to educator, physician, founding father, and dedicated Christian, Benjamin Rush. He observed in 1812, "It has been remarked, that [those]...who assist in cutting wood, making fires, and digging in a garden...often recover, while persons, whose rank exempts them from performing such services, languish away their lives within the walls of the hospital."<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after the California Gold Rush began, Settlers discovered Yosemite Valley and all its beauty in 1851. The writings of James Hutchings and later John Muir and others added to a growing sentiment in the U.S. that places of natural beauty needed to be preserved from the industrial revolution and westward expansion. Congress began preserving sites of special beauty and later established the National Parks Service. During the latter half of the 19th century, American and British working classes discovered outdoor recreation as a means of leisure and rejuvenation. It really gained popularity by the 1880's.<sup>11</sup> Many anthropologists saw modern man in the industrial cities as cut off from nature.<sup>12</sup>

The conservation movement began to form around the same time. Among the early proponents of nature conservation and enjoyment were many influential names who held a belief in the benefit of the Bible and its Creator God. Some kept their beliefs to themselves while others were vocal. All contributed in momentous ways, eloquently spreading ideas of the importance of nature. These early names include George Perkins Marsh author of *Man and Nature* which in 1864 helped launch the modern conservation movement;<sup>12a</sup> Frederick Billings who, inspired by Marsh, advocated for early national parks and helped set standards for sustainable forestry and agriculture;<sup>13</sup> Sir Robert Hunter and Octavia Hill who both helped establish the Commons Preservation Society of England in 1865, one of the first organizations to promote conservation;<sup>14</sup> preacher and author Charles H. Spurgeon who advocated for the benefits and preservation of Creation throughout his ministry from 1854-1892; George Washington Sears author of the 1884 classic *Woodcraft*

which was perhaps the first guide to camping and so influential it has never gone out of print! These and others laid the foundation of nature enthusiasm in the public mind that paved the way for outdoor ministry.

These two ideas of conservation and reconnection to nature grew and flourished throughout the latter half of 19th century. During this same period, the youth ministry movement had become a staple part of Christian ministry. It was only natural that youth workers would try to reconnect the youth with nature and use it to point young minds to its Creator. Many individuals did so. But only a few had the vision to form a ministry where the outdoors was key.

### THE RECONNECTION ERA: 1861 - 1930

Following the Biblical model, these few began to use nature as the classroom for spiritual instruction. First to do so was Fredrick William Gunn, the “father of recreational camping”<sup>15</sup> in the United States. Gunn was an educator who believed that nature was an inherently wonderful teacher and that learning how to manage oneself outdoors was necessary. Gunn was a deeply religious man and outspoken about his abolitionist beliefs. In 1861 Gunn led a group of his own students on a camping trip on the coast of New York City for two weeks of “sleeping in tents, boating, sailing, fishing, marching, and tramping.”<sup>15</sup> This became known as Camp Gunnery, the first official summer camp.<sup>15</sup>

In 1876, the Episcopalian Dr. Joseph Trimble Rothrock opened the North Mountain School of Physical Culture for the express purpose of bring together boys not already living in one place. It was more akin to a modern summer camp than that of Mr. Gunn. The program offered activities such as swimming, walking in the woods, and instruction in natural history, weather, drawing, and others.<sup>15</sup>

The first church-sponsored camp was started by Rev. George W. Hinkley in 1880. His Rhode Island camp resembled a modern summer camp with a daily schedule including religious services, recreations periods, swimming, and evening campfires. But, unlike most modern summer camps, it had no grounds of its own. A year later in 1881 Earnest Balch founded a Christian camp on a New Hampshire island he named Chocorua. It had a similar structure to Hinkley’s camp and emphasized building life skills and Christian character. Camp Chocorua lasted only nine years, but inspired others to start similar camps sparking the summer camp movement.<sup>15</sup>

In this pivotal time, more youth ministry organizations arose. The Christian Endeavor Society was formed in 1881 in Portland, Maine, under the direction of Rev. Francis E. Clark as the first national church youth organization. The forward-thinking Clark established it as non-denominational enabling the organization to grow rapidly. Clark's organization set the precedent for the future of organized youth and outdoor ministry. It still operates today in multiple countries over 130 years later.<sup>16</sup>

Among the growing interest to rescue the youth and save nature appeared the YMCA or Young Men's Christian Association and its sister organization YWCA for women. The YMCA was first established in London in 1844 and later arrived in the USA where it grew. Camping became a cornerstone of YMCA programming in 1885 when the YMCA started Camp Dudley, at Orange Lake, New York which is the longest continually operating camp.<sup>17</sup>

In the last two decades of the 19th century, outdoor ministry began to shift into a subcategory of youth ministry. Summer camps, outdoor-based school programs, and the rise of outdoor recreation changed the way people interacted with and viewed nature. The reconnection era represents the true beginning of modern outdoor ministry as a separate type.

After the turn of the 20th century, nature became more accessible. Enabled by the automobile, American and British citizens flocked to the great outdoors by the thousands. Clubs begin to arise to meet the demand for skills and knowledge. Perhaps the best example of the transition from general youth ministry to outdoor ministry is the Royal Ambassadors. It's traces its heritage back as far as 1883 to youth clubs organized for the express purpose of training youth as missionary ambassadors for Christ. It was officially organized as a national organization in 1908 and by the 1930's regularly included camping and outdoor activities. It went on to establish clubs and camps all over the world now present in at least 14 countries.<sup>18,19</sup>

Probably the most influential organization to the development of modern outdoor ministry is the Boy Scouts of America. It was founded in 1910 by William D. Boyce and modeled on the earlier British Boy Scouts Association. It was started to teach boys camping and nature craft as well as positive character traits. Duty to God is a fundamental principle of Scouting. The religious emblem programs make every effort to strengthen Scouts in their religious obligations. Clubs are often based in churches however the organization is not affiliated with any specific religious organization or creed.<sup>20</sup>

Another influential club based organization is the Pathfinders. 1928 was the year in which the first Pathfinder Club was formed. It was modeled after the Boy Scouts but was overtly Christian. Pathfinders from the beginning was designed to use nature as a medium for teaching Biblical truths. It is probably the first club based organization founded on this model. Today Pathfinders is a global organization in over 160 countries with more than 2 million members.<sup>21</sup>

The Religious Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, have been at the head of every major social justice movement over the past 200 years. During the reconnection era many were at the forefront of helping people get back to nature and enjoy the spiritual benefits it brings. Some members significantly influenced the rise of outdoor recreation and outdoor ministry. These included several notable mountaineers such as Corder Catchpool and Eric Shipton.<sup>21a</sup>

Another, Thomas Arthur Leonard spent his life promoting outdoor activity among British citizens. He began by leading church groups on "holidays". In 1893 he founded the Co-operative Holiday Association (CHA) which operated into the current century. In 1913 Leonard founded the Holiday Fellowship as a more rustic, youth-focused, hostel-type organization. Both the CHA and HF strove to connect their clientele with nature and God in meaningful ways much like modern Christian resorts and conference centers. Leonard also helped establish the Youth Hostels Association and the Ramblers Association both of which still exist. These organizations greatly promoted the spread of outdoor recreation in Britain in the early 20th century.<sup>21a</sup>

Other influential names in the 20th century who believed in God and the importance of nature include: President Theodore Roosevelt who established many National Parks and the U.S. Forest Service; Horace Kephart nicknamed 'John Muir of the East' and author of *Our Southern Highlanders*;<sup>22</sup> David P. Bushnell who worked with youth and whose company Bushnell Inc. put binoculars in reach of the middle class spurring nature enthusiasm; videographer, philosopher, and author Sam Campbell whose mid-century *Living Forest* series has continued to entertain and inspire young nature enthusiasts; Emma Gatewood, the first woman to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail helped to save it and create new national interest in hiking. She also hiked it two more times, all after the age of 67;<sup>23</sup> conservationist William O. Douglas who used his time as the longest serving U.S. Supreme Court Justice to promote the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act and to preserve many locations throughout the U.S.;<sup>24</sup> Jim Rayburn who helped start Young Life, incorporated camping from the beginning in 1944. It now runs youth camps all over the world;<sup>25</sup> Tim

Hansel, who in 1973 began Summit Adventures, one of the first wilderness-based outdoor ministries in the world.<sup>26</sup>

## THE EXPERIENTIAL ERA 1930 - TODAY

The philosophy of experiential learning characterizes the next era. Many philosophers have promoted experience as the best teacher including Plato, John Lock, and John Muir. Outdoor education in our modern sense began with Kurt Hahn founder of Outward Bound. It is not clear if Hahn was a devoted Christian. What is clear is that he shared many Christian principles and these helped form the basis of outdoor education. The Biblical story of the Good Samaritan greatly influenced Hahn. Concerned with moral decline, Hahn set out to build an educational model that not only transferred knowledge, but helped develop a student's character and convey a sense of right and wrong. In 1941, Hahn created Outward Bound in Britain to train seamen how to cope with the rigors of sailing on the high seas. His approach focused on leadership and character development along with fostering a sense of service and intellectual training. He believed these goals were best achieved through experience in a natural, outdoor setting using group activities and outdoor pursuits such as hiking, camping, rock climbing, and others.<sup>27, 28</sup>

Hahn's work helped lead to the most recent trend in outdoor ministry which emphasizes journey-based wilderness experience.<sup>29</sup> Outdoor education philosophy and the classic spiritual wilderness experience as seen in the Bible share many similarities. The experiential era represents a shift in outdoor ministry from one of traditional spiritual training happen near or in nature to a utilization of nature as a medium for spiritual training. It also sees a shift from fractured, independent outdoor ministries to a more unified movement characterized by professionalism. This era has seen explosive growth of programs and organizations that now help maintain and support the outdoor ministry movement at large. The incorporation of Christian Camping International in 1963 marked a significant transition toward centralization and professionalism in the movement. The U.S.A. established the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC) which lead to the development of outdoor spaces through laws such as the Wilderness Act of 1964. ORRRC's work literally paved the way for park development across the country giving the general population in the U.S.A. access to wilderness places which had been nearly inaccessible to those without proper gear, training, or experience. New roads, trails, and facilities were built and maintained to provide better access. This encouraged State and local park development as well as internationally. Easier access helped to popularize outdoor activities as a recreation on a mass scale in the U.S. and around the world.<sup>30</sup>

The experiential era has seen the rise of many faith based outdoor programs that emphasize journey-based experiential ministry. The era has seen outdoor ministry mature into a stand-alone type marked by professionalism. People like author Lloyd D. Mattson and educator Dr. Brady Daniel helped to develop guidelines and standardize practices. Mattson wrote extensively from the 1960's through the early 2000's. His numerous books provided much needed practical advice and pro tips for summer camp staff, churches, clubs, and families on camping and outdoor ministry. Dr. Daniel helped to start one of the first degree programs for Christian outdoor professionals at Montreat College in 1986.<sup>31</sup> Other similar collegiate programs ranging from the bachelor to doctoral level have subsequently arisen. Outdoor ministry has become a type of ministry in its own right. It has produced a new generation of influential leaders such as Dr. Ashley Denton whose pioneering book *Christian Outdoor Leadership* has strengthened and grown the experiential philosophy and outdoor ministry at large.

Arguably the biggest contributor to the professional development of outdoor ministry has come not from a person but an organization. Beginning in 1950 several Christian camping and conference groups saw the benefit of joining resources. Over the next few years their efforts led to the Christian Camping International (CCI) association incorporated in 1963 with Graham Tinning named the first Executive Director. Over the following decades, it grew to include affiliates on 6 continents. Today the U.S.A. chapter is known as the Christian Camps and Conference Association (CCCA).<sup>32</sup>

Before the experiential era, youth groups may have taken an occasional jaunt into the outdoors for a day hike or weekend camping trip. Summer camps offered youth closeness with nature but often did not emphasize spiritual training directly from it. Summer camp leaders were often trained the same as other youth workers. Indeed, youth pastors have historically been the main source of leadership in outdoor based ministry. Outdoor skills were usually optional. Pursuit of expertise in natural knowledge, recreational skills, and the use of these in effective ministry was mostly voluntary and certainly secondary to theological knowledge.

The experiential era could be seen as reaching back to the roots of outdoor wilderness based ministry as set forth in the Bible. Its philosophy focuses on providing a challenging experience and then assisting participants in understanding how this experience contributes to their spiritual growth. An increased focus on professionalism in outdoor ministry has raised the standards for outdoor ministry leaders. Increasingly outdoor ministry leaders are required to have knowledge and skill in the outdoors in addition to theological. These skills are moving from an optional position to a mandatory one. This



has opened new frontiers in outdoor ministry. Classic summer camp ministry caters to children and adolescents. But new models of outdoor ministry that have arisen since the '70's and '80's offer spiritual wilderness experience for adults also. Some also cater to both ages in the form of family focused ministry.

The philosophy of the experiential era has helped outdoor ministry rediscover its roots. It has led to a strong and thriving ministry model that has seen explosive growth and success. Organizations such as Christian Camps International, the Wilderness Ministry Institute, and the Christian Adventure Association help to drive outdoor ministry toward professionalism and results oriented practices. The experiential philosophy has added positive aspects to the classic summer camp model of ministry which in turn helps breed and foster future generations of outdoor ministry leaders. Outdoor ministry is vital to God's work of restoration. Understanding its history helps to understand its future and the impact it can have for God's kingdom!

## Part II

The next chapter in outdoor ministry history has yet to be written. Where is this form of gospel ministry headed in the future? What trends will dictate its direction and effectiveness? Should outreach leaders pay more attention to this form of ministry? Historically, outdoor ministry has proven to be a viable form of in-reach, outreach, and training for future generations of Christians. Today it is more vibrant than ever. So where is it headed?

Many summer camps and outdoor ministries are tied directly to specific churches or denominations. With so many people leaving churches, especially young generations according to recent research by The Pew Research Center,<sup>6</sup> these camps and ministries are losing much of their clientele. Many were designed to primarily cater to existing members of their parent church or denomination. Many of these ministries have not historically focused on outreach so much as in-reach. In-reach is vital. With the large and ever-growing interest in outdoor recreation in Western culture and around the world, a fantastic outreach opportunity exists for all outdoor ministries! Shrinking churches may force many outdoor ministries to refocus their target audience and mission. This is an opportunity, not of a crisis! Outdoor ministries may be a future hub of outreach evangelism!<sup>3</sup>

A recent survey by Pew Research suggests that Millennials are more interested in continuing the work of the Gospel than previously thought. While many Millennials may be leaving churches, this does not necessarily mean they are completely forsaking their faith in Christ. A Pew Research survey from 2015 suggests that many Millennials are still very serious about maintaining their faith and in sharing it-- albeit in less traditional ways.<sup>5</sup> Finding new ways to share the Gospel with new generations can be a good thing. The ways of the past may become less effective. The survey also indicated that there is a core segment of Millennials who are committed to picking up the leadership torch in traditional ways too.<sup>5</sup> Church and ministry leaders can be confident that there will be Millennials who, “will hold themselves to the standards of behavior and motivation described in Scripture, and will live identifiable as disciples of Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> The future of Gospel ministry may look different or employ new methods but will be carried forward.

Current trends in American summer camps include a rapid rise in programs involving adventure camps/programs, family camps/programs, and nature/environmental education programs according to the American Camps Association.<sup>4</sup> This trend creates fantastic evangelism opportunities for Christian outdoor ministry. First of all, adventure and

camping programs provide a platform for experiential education and character building. The wilderness experience as modeled throughout the Bible is a primary means God uses to train and prepare His followers and to build and test their character. Adventure programs offer a great medium through which to use wilderness experience training. The effects are more potent and long-lasting when these experiences are shared with family or friends. The lessons learned and struggles overcome are reinforced long after the program has ended and participants are back at home when shared with people from home. Family focused programs have this advantage and should be emphasized more in outdoor ministry along with programs that emphasize friend involvement.

One proven framework of outdoor ministry that emphasizes friend and family involvement is the club-based model. A new Christian scouting movement in America has arisen and is growing rapidly. It is called Trail Life USA. It is an outdoor focused charter organization similar to Boy Scouts of America but is expressly Christian. After its first full year of operation, TLUSA had over 500 troops in 48 states and more than 20,000 members. It is experiencing explosive growth. Their focus is on outdoor adventure, character, and leadership development through a biblical worldview.<sup>1</sup> It represents a current growing trend in evangelism.

The internet and social media are playing an increasingly important role in outdoor ministry also. The internet has enabled the Gospel message to spread more rapidly on all fronts. It has also boosted the effectiveness of outdoor ministry in two key ways. First, it has increased the exposure of outdoor ministries to the general public enabling them to reach and serve more people. Secondly, social media in particular enables these ministries to stay in contact with previous participants and continue discipleship or encourage participation in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Outdoor ministry has a bright future. It is growing and adapting. It is gaining a more important role in outreach evangelism. It is more important than ever for in-reach and maintaining the fold of God's people. Christians must encourage its growth at the local level as well as at the organizational. It will require volunteers, laity, and professionals to grow and succeed. Outdoor ministry has many forms which are all effective and vital. Experiential education will predominate its future just as it has in Biblical history. It is a form of ministry that outreach and in-reach leaders should take notice of and promote. What better discipleship method is there than learning about the Creator in his creation!

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## Part II

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